

It's All About Who You Know

Using good networking techniques to increase business

By Terry Begue

I talk to many painters who say they are always struggling to find work, but they refuse to put themselves out there and meet new people. These are the same people who tell me they don't have much money to spend on marketing. Go figure.

Your goal as a business owner should be to get to a point where all your work comes from repeat and referral customers. It's the best business in the business. How do you make that happen? It's all about networking.

The best part about networking is it costs very little. Most of the cost is in the time you put into making connections. You might pay for a breakfast or lunch here and there, but hey, you have to eat anyway, right? Ultimately, you want to reach a point where the only money you spend on advertising is for community awareness.

Everyone needs painting work done. Or they know someone who does at some point. The more people you know, the more your business will grow. Whether you're a startup or have been in business for years, choosing not to network makes you invisible in your community and around fellow small-business owners. Chances are you're losing jobs to people who are meeting people and making contacts.

Networking is important because people buy from those they know, like and trust. Anyone who has heard me speak or read my articles knows how I feel about becoming the most likable and trustworthy choice. You can't be successful without it.

Attend networking functions. These can include chamber of commerce mixers or BNI meetings. Go to Meetup.com to find out what kind of networking groups are available in your area, or get involved in a community service group you feel good about supporting such as Kiwanis,

Lions or Jaycees.

One of the best things I've ever done for myself and my business was joining Toastmasters International. Toastmasters is an organization designed to help attendees become better speakers and leaders. It is open to anyone who wants to join. Originally, I joined to become better at communicating with my customers. The first time I walked into a meeting, I was shocked to see two other painting contractors who were already members.

I have grown far better at articulating why we are the best choice to paint a prospect's home. I've also picked up quite a few jobs from fellow Toastmaster members, as well as their friends and families.

Attending networking gatherings creates immediate visibility for you and your business. That's vital to your success, especially in an overpopulated industry like painting. Put a face to your business by letting people get to know you in social situations, and give yourself a presence outside your normal circles. You get an opportunity to give people a chance to know who you are, so they are more likely to hire and refer business to you.

Here are five things you can do to ensure you get the most from networking events:

- **Be genuine and authentic.** Networking conversations can go downhill quickly if other people can tell you are interested only in selling painting jobs. That's not appropriate in networking. Take a genuine interest in people and be respectful. Remember, you can learn a great deal from each person you meet.
- **Arrive early.** If you arrive before everyone else, you are assured the maximum opportunity to meet everyone.
- **Be welcoming.** Don't be afraid to approach people you don't know. Make sure to shake hands and make eye contact with people when introduced, or

when you introduce yourself. Don't look away as if you are looking for someone more interesting to talk with for the first two or three minutes of your conversation. This is considered rude.

- **Bring plenty of business cards.** One important element to networking is how people will contact you. If you collect a lot of cards, it can get confusing whom you talked with and what you talked about. Write something about your conversation on the back of each card and bring it up in your second conversation when you follow up.

- **Find common ground.** It is a proven fact that people most enjoy the company of other people who are like-minded. Moreover, common interests are a surefire incentive to create interaction and make it easier for people to come together and connect.

Remember, take the initiative. Do not wait for people to come to you. ~~Never~~ feel inferior to others no matter where you are, even if they have more experience than you. They are still human and care about meeting, connecting and growing their business, like you.

So, be proud of your accomplishments. Realize you deserve to be in the networking mix. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither is a business. It takes time and a desire to succeed. The willingness to put yourself out there so people can get to know you better as a person and as a painter is vital to your success in 2012. **APC**

Terry Begue is the owner of Begue Painting Inc., and author of the popular e-book The Wealthy House Painter's Guide to Having it All. He's been a successful housepainter and enjoys helping others start their own successful painting businesses too. Discover more at yourhousepaintingbusiness.com.